

## **The Use of Work-based Learning Pedagogical Perspectives to Inform Flexible Practice within Higher Education**

Dr Paula Nottingham

*Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom*

Dr Paula Nottingham, Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University,  
London, United Kingdom, NW4 4BT, 0208 411 5087, 07799033978,  
[p.nottingham@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:p.nottingham@mdx.ac.uk)

# **The Use of Work-based Learning Pedagogical Perspectives to Inform Flexible Practice within Higher Education**

The renewed emphasis on developing flexible learning practices in higher education underscores the importance of understanding pedagogies for students who are based in the workplace or undertake significant work-related elements of study. This paper draws on research that explores how work-based learning (WBL) pedagogy operates in UK higher education using three main perspectives that help to conceptualise the existing range of practice: discipline-centred, learner-centred and employer-centred. Data was collected from twenty academic practitioners with expertise in WBL using qualitative interviews, documents and observations at fourteen different institutions from seven regions in England. The research findings suggest that there are both commonalities and distinctive attributes across the range of practice that influence how academics develop and orient their pedagogy. It is argued that the characteristics and discursive features of these WBL perspectives present pedagogical approaches that could be adapted to inform more flexible mainstream provision.

Key words: flexible learning, pedagogy, work-based learning, experiential learning, workforce development

## **Introduction**

As higher education (HE) institutions embed more flexible approaches in teaching and learning for the twenty-first century learner, work-based learning (WBL) pedagogy continues to present innovative ways to develop curricula for engaging learners and workplace partners in order to widen access to higher education. The purpose of the paper is to provide a critique of three central pedagogical perspectives in the existing range of WBL pedagogy in the United Kingdom (UK) that could be conceptualised and adapted across a wider spectrum of the HE curriculum. These pedagogical perspectives

and the experience of those delivering WBL could inform academic and academic related practitioners who are not directly involved in WBL programmes.

As a WBL academic practitioner, my interest in WBL pedagogy is based on a professional commitment to contribute to an international body of knowledge within HE and to use evidence-based practice for my academic work with students. This paper draws on research that was designed to provide greater understanding of the WBL pedagogic range in use for learners based in the workplace. The findings were gathered as part of a larger research project during a recent period of expansion for work-based pedagogy and are here re-examined in terms of how these findings might inform a wider application.

This paper addresses the need to provide research that critically examines WBL pedagogy within HE. The last sections and conclusion of the paper consider implications derived from the research as they align with current higher educational trends. The paper argues that understanding the nuances of the perspectives and distinctions in the academic discourses across the range could enable academics to apply and embed into their practice various elements of existing WBL pedagogy to address the current need for more flexible provision.

### **Work-based Learning within HE**

WBL represents an approach to higher learning that integrates learning in the professional workplace with the principles of HE as a way to promote “the development of intellectual, personal, critical and analytical skills, which will support and complement your practical skills and knowledge” (Helyer, 2015, 3). Many aspects of WBL provision harmonise with progressive HE principles and pedagogies such as Walker’s (2006) ‘capabilities approach’, based on authors like Sen (1993) and Nussbaum (1993), which promotes an ethical and democratising view of pedagogy and

widening participation for HE. Barnett's concept of 'supercomplexity' presents the world as having multiple frameworks for assimilating knowledge (2000); this notion has been central to a drive for universities to adopt more flexible learning strategies within mainstream provision (Barnett, 2014). Internationally, using the workplace as a site of learning has been an accepted route for work-based and work-integrated studies in Australia and Europe; work-based applications have been used to inform European lifelong learning and are a part of the vision for Europe (EC, 2015) including the inclusion of less traditional adult learners within higher education (Eur-lex, 2011, viii).

Although in simple terms WBL practice uses the experience of the workplace as the content of study, the relationship that WBL and experiential learning has to more conventional HE practice is a complex one and continues to be debated within the HE context. Universities value professional preparation such as the use of simulated environments, e.g. broadcast studios and interactive clinical education, and initial work placements. However in the past, university study that focuses on learning from the workplace has challenged the academy's view about legitimate knowledge (Boud and Solomon, 2001) and in more recent research Walsh has discussed how tensions still exist between experiential pedagogies and those in more conventional programmes (2014).

Previous research centred on this type of practice presents debates about the purpose and/or function of WBL within HE, with early attempts to map (Brennan and Little, 1996) and to identify work-based practice (Boud and Solomon, 2001). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) report *Work-based Learning: Illuminating the Higher Education Landscape* (Nixon et al., 2006) recommended 'unpacking' WBL and more research about WBL "demonstrating how the features of work-based learning fit to the pedagogical mission of HEIs" (57). Many ideas used in WBL pedagogy are

relevant to mainstream practices within HE including the use of reflective practice (Schön, 1987; Siebert and Walsh, 2012), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Dewey, 1910), using a tripartite approach to learning (student, workplace and university) that includes action research and online learning (Gray, 2001), and transdisciplinary knowledge production (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, 2001).

A distinction between the use of the workplace as a ‘mode’ or a ‘field of practice’ has been useful to differentiate WBL within HE (Costley and Armsby, 2007), especially among ‘newer’ forms of WBL that operate outside disciplinary boundaries and in new discursive spaces (Gibbs and Costley, 2006). More recent trends within HE have sought to develop a greater understanding of workforce development (Wedgewood, 2007; Connor, 2005) and define newer practice such as in Hordern’s (2013) range of ‘workforce development’ based on an analysis of ‘productive systems’. WBL theories and practice can also be found in more traditional disciplinary related sources such as health practice (Rounce and Workman, 2005) and engineering (Medhat, 2008).

In the UK, government led policy initiatives have encouraged HE institutions to engage WBL and follow many European-wide lifelong learning initiatives to educate the workforce for economic buoyancy and social cohesion. Leitch (2006) called for more of the working population in England to gain HE qualifications and *Higher Ambitions* (BIS, 2009) advocated widening participation as a way to make HE more relevant to social and economic workforce demands. More recently the UK government has shifted emphasis to business collaboration (Browne, 2010) and a drive for employability and work experience (Wilson, 2012). Similar policy developments have been seen worldwide as the expectations for HE to include graduate employability in its curricula. For academics, policy changes in the UK have meant that work-based and

experience-based provision is now more readily seen as a mainstream form of flexible HE pedagogy. However, one trend in recent guidelines is to once again narrowly define work-based and placement learning as a “mode” (QAA, 2012, 2) which might limit the pedagogic scope for academics who are seeking a more comprehensive interpretation of WBL to inform their learning and teaching strategies.

### **Research into Work-based Pedagogic Perspectives**

The initial research problem into WBL pedagogy focused on bringing greater clarity to issues such as: how WBL pedagogy could add value or positively impact HE, the delivery of WBL versus the theory of WBL, and the social implications of WBL (Nixon et al. 2006). Work-based and work-integrated literature has greatly expanded in the twenty years, but there has been a tendency to conflate differing aspects of WBL or to segregate pedagogies within particular disciplines making it more difficult to follow trends and innovations. There seemed to be a number of WBL practices concurrently operating which represented a range of underpinning philosophies, conceptual positions and learning theories from which academic practice was structured. To understand existing WBL provision, there needed to be greater understanding of the range of practice and how this range was interpreted in terms of pedagogy and academic discourse.

In order to explore this range of existing WBL within HE, three main areas of practice were identified from the literature to establish a sample framework (Mason, 2002). An exploratory typology identified academic and academic related practitioners through which these areas or ‘perspectives’ could be evaluated. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, documents related to practice and observations of the academic practitioner.

The research used a qualitative approach (Mason, 2002) with a constructivist methodology (Bryman, 2008) to underpin a ‘social world’ ontology that explores issues that are situated and changing. The data collected was from the lived experiences of social actors who have expressed their own interpretations of their experiences. This was an important aspect of the research as people are primary data sources “where the aim is to explore people’s individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes, social norms” (Mason, 2002, 56). To further develop an understanding of the underpinning philosophies and influences from the respondents, discourse analysis provided a way to conceptualise the ‘bigger picture’ (Phillips and Hardy, 2002) that related to emerging issues about WBL pedagogy and its related academic discourses. Limitations for the research included the small number of participants within the sample, limited interview and observation times, and data from a time-limited period in which the research was undertaken.

The research sample consisted of twenty WBL lecturers and senior academic staff using interviews, documents and observations. These expert respondents were purposefully identified for their expertise in the field through a sample framework (Mason, 2002) that established specific criteria for the research. Respondents were sent an invitation to participate after being identified from an extensive review of literature and existing programmes. Many respondents had published research in the field and many had been recognised by their universities or colleges, as well as governmental and professional bodies, for their expertise as HE practitioners. The final sample was composed of respondents who were situated at fourteen different universities or colleges in seven of the English national regions; the data therefore provided a cross-section of practice in order to explore for the research.

Academic practitioners from a more disciplinary or practice-based range of WBL were associated with the disciplines of health, engineering and education. Four respondents represented the health discipline in Nursing and Allied Health and in Radiography. For engineering there were two respondents: one who delivered a Masters distance learning course in construction engineering management and one who delivered a Foundation Degree (a two-year sub-degree programme that leads to an award similar to an associate degree) in construction engineering. Within education there were three respondents: one facilitated a WBL Masters degree course in Educational Studies and two respondents worked in separate Foundation Degree programmes in Early Years.

For those academic practitioners that had expertise in experiential, generic or transdisciplinary WBL, a total of five respondents were interviewed. The respondents came from mainly senior positions that still involved delivery; the roles consisted of a Director of programmes, a Senior Executive and academic developer, a Manager for a Professional Development programme, a Senior Lecturer who had taken on management responsibilities, and another senior member of staff.

For those based in a variety of project, workforce development or business-related areas, six respondents were interviewed with varying levels of experience with WBL but with a high degree of associated knowledge in workplace practice, placements, or related HE educational practice. Because of the nature of this area of practice, often the work entailed respondents being involved in a number of posts that were either seconded or related to institutional developments in business related provision, employer engagement or workforce development. This context was characterised by short-term or long-term projects that were developing curriculum, strategic practice or research that had an employer-facing focus. Two respondents from



each institution were interviewed in order to take into account the teamwork between developing and delivering curriculum. While documents were given by respondents to evidence curriculum no observation was possible because of both the commercial aspect of this work and transitory nature of the provision.

### **Findings and Discussion of WBL Pedagogy Using Perspectives**

The research that has informed this paper explored existing WBL pedagogy by talking to academic practitioners who had expertise in WBL. The range of perspectives examined within WBL for the research is characterised as discipline-centred, learner-centred and employer-centred (see Figure 1).

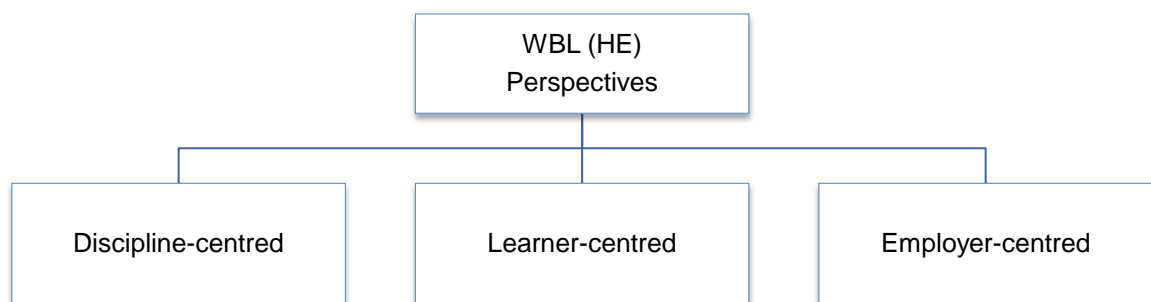


Figure 1: Typology of WBL Perspectives

Evidence suggests that within this range of perspectives there were a number of attributes WBL respondents held in common although some details of their use within the perspectives might vary. These common characteristics included:

- academic practitioners' view that WBL pedagogy was an innovative form of HE
- embedded use of reflection and reflective practice
- recognition and advocacy of situated workplace knowledge

- use of negotiated learning and/or open ‘shell’ units of study that allow specific content within the curriculum to be applied to modules that are based on generic learning outcomes, portfolios, and approved prior experiential learning
- equivalency of academic standards for WBL
- academic practitioners’ use of personal experience to develop pedagogy
- link to widening participation and widening access to HE
- relationship of government policy as a driver for initiating educational development

As academic practitioners indicated across the range, and explained further in the perspective points of view, work-based approaches were innovative because they were based on experiential learning that was located and applied in the workplace. The research showed that academic practitioners identified a shared sense of belonging or being part of a collective range of HE practice (Respondent H, Respondent F). This perceived common ground helped to ‘unpack’ (Nixon et al. 2006) the pedagogies and identify aspects of practice that explained how WBL developed and operated within a HE environment.

The respondents also indicated differing views about the conceptual scope and/or academic discourses used across the range. The content and style of delivery was differentiated and adapted to the experiential needs of the students or organisation. The role of WBL practitioners varied dependent on the specialisms required, and partnership expectations with employers could vary across the range of practice. WBL staff were often based in various units within the university, such as in academic departments or in professional staffing areas such as business development, and this structure could affect the pedagogic development by imposing either academic or business-related goals for the curriculum.

These distinct characteristics relate not only to how individuals operate this curriculum within the institution and workplace but how the pedagogies incorporate theory into the curriculum to create various underpinning philosophies. As the evidence within the perspectives was extensive and complex, the findings were examined in more detail using five pedagogic themes that emerged from the data: curriculum/programme design, practitioner role, practice context, tensions with practice context, and employer or workplace relationship.

### ***Discipline-centred Perspective***

Among the commonalities with other perspectives was the finding that academic practitioners considered WBL to be an innovative form of HE learning and teaching because it engaged students with real world problems within the workplace. This use of the workplace challenged a more conventional understanding of HE curriculum as preparatory rather than participatory. WBL pedagogy and experiential approaches were seen by respondents as more forward thinking than conventional mainstream provision and were also seen to be breaking new pedagogic ground within the disciplinary fields and in HE as a whole. Assessment differed from 'practitioner-based' HE provision in the past (Respondent D) and required engaging with a wider theoretical base that extended the boundaries of HE. WBL incorporated generic learning outcomes embedded into workplace learning experiences that recognised situated knowledge. Academic practitioners had worked with experience-based learning for many years and advocated work-based pedagogy within HE. WBL practice was described as more than a 'bolt on' (Respondent G) as WBL pedagogy was integrated into the experiential workplace provision. WBL pedagogy in engineering allowed learners to think more deeply about workplace evidence from industry and critically appraise how that knowledge was tied to current legislation or professional standards (Respondent L).

Respondent K considered a wider engagement with WBL to be beneficial to the type of disciplinary workplace learning that is a tightly controlled testing of competence and performance in the field of education.

Academic practitioners in this perspective identified WBL students as inquirers that use reflective practice in the workplace. WBL theorists that represent the conceptual underpinnings of practice in a wider sense, like Boud and Kolb, were mentioned as informing pedagogy; indicating common theoretical ground with other perspectives in the range of practice. There is also an appreciation of the role that widening participation, where students might be the first in their families to attend HE, factored into the pedagogy. Students are described as coming from diverse backgrounds in a way that benefitted students in classroom discussions by introducing a greater complexity of experience (Respondent T).

The findings also indicated distinctive elements in the existing WBL practice for this perspective. Importantly the disciplinary context of the learning remained a focus in the curriculum and disciplinary knowledge remained a large part of the WBL pedagogy. As Respondent L said: "...although I'm running this now and I have pragmatic experience, I wouldn't say that my academic discipline is on WBL so there aren't really any theoretical concepts that I can say I used... my own academic knowledge is on... [engineering expertise]." The use of specific theoretical knowledge in this perspective implied tacit knowledge that stemmed from students being educated within a particular disciplinary framework and continuing that understanding in the workplace within their professional roles.

In practice this use of theoretical disciplinary knowledge meant that some discipline-centred practitioners focused on subject-specific WBL rather than WBL pedagogy operating outside their disciplinary framework. The discipline-centred

perspective of WBL had grown out of traditions from practice-based learning that have emphasised WBL that assessed competency for work-related procedures and knowledge within particular disciplinary areas. These traditions incorporate both the idea of ‘applied’ theoretical knowledge, such as engineering, and disciplines such as health and education that had elements that had to be assessed in a practice situation within the working environment.

As this WBL programming generally ran within the disciplinary structures of the university, carrying out WBL could bring out ‘tribal’ behaviour by disciplinary university lecturers who claimed that WBL was sometimes not conforming to standards within the discipline (Respondent D). The challenges of developing curriculum with specific disciplinary content related to how pedagogy was structured and respondents saw WBL curriculum as a more student-centred approach than the earlier practice-based approach. There was still said to be an active comparison to more practice-based curriculum by managers and mentors in the workplace.

The workplace dedicated to professional areas of expertise played a significant part in the curriculum; in the case of the National Health Service (public health authority), the partnership with the university dictated on-site educational practice was managed through acknowledging its role as public sector employer that funded WBL, and professional body engagement. In this range of WBL, professional bodies have a significant role and relate to specific certification in the workplace, such as ensuring the licensing for practitioners. Competencies, such as performance related skills, are an element in the curriculum design and assessment in this perspective, often because of the need to ensure public safety in professional contexts.

Respondents had a sophisticated understanding of specific design aspects of the curriculum that have evolved from their practice-based traditions. Within the discipline-

centred perspective mentors played a more significant role in the disciplinary-centred workplace, with lecturers reliant on them for services such as assessing competences in the workplace; this was especially the case with Foundation Degree (sub-degree) provision. Action learning sets were also established in the workplace feature, especially in health, because it is beneficial for the students to be grouped within small cohorts in their place of work to learn more effectively. Findings from the discipline-centred perspective include:

- disciplinary context of the learning remained a focus in the curriculum and disciplinary knowledge remained a large part of the WBL pedagogy
- some disciplinary practitioners focused on subject-specific WBL rather than WBL pedagogy operating outside their disciplinary framework
- professional areas of expertise played a significant part in the curriculum including professional body engagement
- respondents had a sophisticated understanding of specific design aspects of the curriculum that have evolved from their practice-based traditions
- mentors play a more significant role in assessing competences in the workplace

### ***Learner-centred Perspective***

Learner-centred WBL academic practitioners acted to innovate and invent HE pedagogy within the curriculum to facilitate learning in the workplace. First and second generation WBL academic practitioners, those who had originally designed curriculum currently in use (Nottingham 2012), advocated and created new academic structures enabling WBL, championing change within HE institutions to accommodate the use of situated knowledge acquisition in the workplace. The application of flexible negotiated learning was considered central to the methodology of WBL mainly within units of study; this

featured pedagogic elements such as the use of generic shell modules and portfolios. Assessment was seen as flexible, fit for purpose, and using HE standards that recognised coursework rather than exams; approved prior experiential learning was used as a route to individually negotiated programmes. Assessment, accredited learning agreements, and negotiated learning agreements related WBL practice to equivalent quality standards used for disciplinary learning within the university. Literature that conceptualised experience, such as the use of an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), was common to other perspectives in the range, although was perhaps more prominent in this perspective because of its focus on developing live projects in the workplace (Boud and Costley, 2007). Support of learner-centred pedagogy that operated independently within HE institutions allowed it to flourish in certain universities that supported using WBL to widen provision for non-traditional students or mature students with part-time routes.

Learner-centred respondents also stated distinctive elements within this range of practice. Academic practitioners viewed the pedagogy as differing from more discipline-based interpretations of work-related learning and were more conscious of the ‘mode’ versus ‘field of study’ WBL debate (Costley and Armsby, 2007) introduced to clarify this range within HE practice. Respondent C identified the importance of the learner as a key characteristic for this perspective: “where government find it rather difficult to get hold of it in policy terms ... is talking about the learner... pedagogy, learning philosophy, and this is essential in learner centred learning, absolutely... if it’s situated it has to be learner centred.” Respondents spoke about building new independent WBL programmes within HE outside disciplinary academic structures and within educational units that had not existed previously within HE institutions. WBL also incorporated organisational study approaches that recognised the student in a

workplace role. As Respondent F said: "... every learner is an individual learner. That sounds like a truism, a cliché and stuff like that, but even these cohort contracts... which is are our particular thing, they're nearly always written in an enabling way which would require the person to use their own practice as the lens through which they explore these things...."

Learner-centred respondents referred to pedagogic influences from their own disciplinary pathways but also sought to broaden access to experience-based learning that was more associated with continuing professional development and adult learning theory. The basic tenets of learner-centred WBL pedagogy evolved from models that have roots in American training (Respondent C), a pathway that Costley described as "independent study, which in the 1970s and 1980s drew upon a humanistic educational tradition" (2010, xv).

Learning that was associated with 'generic' experiential learning outcomes allowed students to theorise their work-related projects, challenging the concept that disciplinary knowledge was the sole organising principle for workplace learning. The academic practitioner's facilitation approach was presented differently than 'teaching' in a subject area and used more generic guidelines such as those advocated by professional credit associations (SEEC, 2010) to level and credit experiential learning. Workplace knowledge was often viewed as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, stressing the development of thinking using Mode-2 forms of knowledge that embraced knowledge production outside of the academy and "carried out in the context of application" (Gibbons et al. 1994, 3). This way of thinking goes beyond earlier research models that separated science and society (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons, 2001). Respondents also stressed theoretical influences from adult education theories.



Much of this practice was operated outside strictly disciplinary pedagogic structures of the university within units that specialised in learner-centred WBL. There could be a relationship between partnership programmes and the organisations that supported this learning, and in some cases, paid for students' education. Expanding this learner-centred provision was an imperative for academic practitioners although scalability was an issue for planning provision (Respondent F) because of the funding issues in this expansion. While learner-centred pedagogy had previously been supported through various government initiatives prior to the larger-scale employer engagement projects that sought to widen participation to HE, further issues of the sustainability for learner-centred pedagogy were related to HE policy changes that introduced the skills agenda for workforce development and employer engagement to HE. Findings from the learner-centred perspective include:

- academic practitioners viewed the pedagogy as distinctive from more discipline-based interpretations
- basic tenets of WBL pedagogy evolved from independent learning models
- learning outcomes for students were more associated with 'generic' experiential learning outcomes
- workplace knowledge acquisition was often viewed as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary
- much of this practice was operated outside strictly disciplinary pedagogic structures with HE institutions
- issues for academic practitioners in this study about sustainability and scalability were related to HE policy and workplace development

### ***Employer-centred Perspective***

The use of reflective learning theory, such as Dewey (1910) and Schön (1987), linked the employer-centred perspectives to the other WBL viewpoints. Disciplinary sources of knowledge were combined with more business-oriented approaches but the ideas behind workforce development also used experiential and experience-based theories. Work-based learning provision was designed to operate both within conventional disciplinary knowledge structures but also acknowledged more corporate or sector related groupings; the positioning of the provision in the university was often outside the mainstream university academic structures. Personal experience and professional experience were again used in curriculum development; academic practitioners indicated a real passion for developing learning that would operate in the real world of work. The profile of the non-traditional adult learner was considered in academic planning, and this consideration was comparative to the recognition of widening participation and widening access developed within the other perspectives in the range.

All of the respondents in this perspective considered the design of the pedagogy to be an innovative form of HE and many respondents indicated that WBL was breaking new pedagogic ground in HE because this was a period of expansion and new methods of carrying out practice were needed. A number of respondents represented WBL as an alternative to conventional HE pedagogy (Respondent H), espousing the common understanding that learning could be for work, at work, and through work (Seagraves et al., 1996). As in the other perspectives, there was a relationship to government policy, especially the more recent employer engagement; the employer engagement agenda within the universities had increased institutional support short-term and long-term project activity and workforce development provision. In all three institutions where staff were interviewed, the government's drive for Foundation Degrees (sub-degrees)

that required a WBL component made it possible to resource staff to design curriculum for these and other types of partnership provision. The perception of these sub-degrees as agents of change could be compared to the other perspectives as all the academic practitioners valued the role of sub-degrees in creating progression pathways for non-traditional students.

Distinctive attributes included the positioning of this perspective and features of the design of the curriculum varied somewhat from the learner-centred perspective. The employer-centred WBL perspective looked at workforce development as a ‘newest’ form of WBL. The provision was viewed as ‘education’, but the employer, rather than the student, provided a focal point for curriculum development. Greater employer and sector interaction was expected to integrate the learning into existing businesses, with a pragmatic approach to developing learning and teaching the aligned with in-company training. A wide interpretation of WBL was influenced by this demand-led workforce development context that included disciplinary and extra-disciplinary contexts.

The design of curriculum was generally based on employer designated learning outcomes even when some aspects of the curriculum were not credit-based (e.g. in-house provision for a company) with accreditation as being optional for the student. Sometimes this WBL perspective was delivered alongside learner-centred curriculum within the institution, but this was seen as producing some tensions that affected the differing HE systems or operations. Respondents described a facilitation approach that was co-created, client focused, and experimented with tools that ‘scaffolded’ (Respondent J) the learning; this indicates that organisations and corporate staff members helped to substantially shape the provision and the way it was presented. Pedagogy was influenced by professional experiences working with management and acknowledged the role that HE played in workplace development for businesses.

Interesting points were raised about the ethics of disclosure with these ‘newer’ types of students (Respondent H) that could also be linked to the learner-centred approach; this seemed to anticipate extra risks for the providers within the curriculum.

Employer-centred respondents were aware that while the provision for the individual is an important element in the pedagogy in use, the employer input into the curriculum generally takes precedence when determining practice. As Respondent M said: “I’m very clear in my mind that the client in this context is actually... the organisation...the client is the employer.” Workforce development had demand-led content that used the workplace in order to generate the curriculum, but also developed bespoke individualised content for students. Respondent J explained: “With the executive work that we’ve been involved with, it’s co-created. We haven’t gone to people with a syllabus, we’ve gone to find out what we’re looking for... asking what’s the need that has driven you to ask for this development.” This view seemed to corroborate the position that HE as a learning provider needed to adapt a business culture that accommodated multiple workforce markets (Wedgewood, 2007). The employer-centred view that embraces workforce development and employer-engagement introduces a closer link with the business and community activities of the university.

The academic practitioners’ roles varied within the university but often respondents were a part of an impermanent team that had been recently assembled; in this case respondents came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds including science, social science and management. Most of the respondents responsible for planning and delivery of the curriculum remained as academics seconded to WBL but many had links with business-related provision. Respondents had job experience such

as supervising work-related placements, managing vocational provision, research and management within HE, as well as teaching.

While taking part in learning programmes within employer engagement, staff had a sophisticated understanding of the business related functions of the university as they applied to the provision of workplace curriculum. The planning and sustainability of the curriculum was often linked to strategic goals that would provide an additional income stream for the institution. This private sector workforce development was in contrast to discipline-centred public sector clients (e.g. the National Health Service) that had a continuous funding need and established mechanisms to provide for HE in the workplace.

Some of the respondents expressed the view that this work was linked to a business-interaction or knowledge exchange approach to HE that was strategically important for students, practitioners and institutions as a resource that brought current practice into the university. On the other hand some respondents mentioned employer engagement as being problematic in terms of sustainability within the university context (Respondent P) and respondents said there was a tendency for the work to stop when the project funding ended. Foundation Degrees (sub-degrees) that were introduced to include WBL were seen an integral to the increase in developing practice (Respondent H, M, J) but some of the initiatives for WBL could be marginalised without institutional support after initial funding. Findings from the employer-centred perspective include:

- the employer provided a focal point for curriculum designed for workforce development
- respondents described a facilitation style that was co-created and client focused
- academic practitioners' positions varied within the university but in this study often the respondents were a part of an impermanent team

- there was a sophisticated understanding of how the business-related functions of the provision were linked to university income generation
- academic practitioners considered WBL as a valuable resource for knowledge exchange and useful for building strategic interaction between students, academics and HE institutions
- there was a tendency for the pedagogic development to stop when project funding ended

### **Implications for Practice**

The research explored WBL across a range of perspectives to enable a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which this range operates with HE. Academic practitioners view WBL pedagogy as a way to innovate within the university, providing curriculum that allows learners to integrate knowledge gained from academic study with real world contexts. WBL academics adapt their practice beyond their own personal pedagogical beliefs to provide custom-built and blended approaches to WBL (Abukari, 2014), but this research also indicates that the academic practitioners' orientation within the HE context is a key consideration. The research using the existing range of WBL pedagogy identified that academics practitioners design their learning and teaching to align with their WBL perspective as well as shape that perspective by using their own influences and pedagogic principles.

The rationale for developing new practice was shown to be complex and related to the mission of the institution. Throughout the range, respondents took great care to provide a progressive curriculum for students who were based in the workplace and could actively make use of their university studies in their professional roles. A few respondents mentioned challenges related to institutional requirements to produce

programmes quickly and questioned the impact this had on the curriculum. In some cases extra scrutiny was required for validation panels and accreditation from outside bodies to ensure both flexibility and quality assurance (Respondent E).

Lester and Costley suggest that newer forms of WBL practice, such as workforce development, still need to be framed and conceptualised beyond individual employer need and skills development (2010). The research in this paper conveys the perceptions from academic practitioners that there is much to be gained from engaging with the employer-centred pedagogic perspective. WBL providers are engaged with employer-engagement activities that require versatility and rapid responses to changes in curriculum and content. WBL practitioners who work with both students and employers are taking on changed academic roles, both within and outside HE disciplines (Respondent H, Respondent I).

Hordern's (2013) models of workforce development present an updated mapping of WBL that has synergies with the pedagogic perspectives outlined in this research. Hordern notes that the challenge for those involved in this type of activity is the difficulty of short term government priorities and the HE community's skepticism regarding the scalability of the delivery and the "quality and validity of the types of knowledge produced in the workplace" (Hordern, 2013, 427). It is argued here that a greater acknowledgement of the full range of WBL pedagogy is essential to creating educational provision that meets workforce development demands.

In the research that informed this paper staff in both research-intensive universities and colleges cited limited resources for pedagogic development (Respondent I, Respondent G), indicating that while these new directions exist, it is important to supply the needed resources to develop and embed newer forms of WBL pedagogy both within and outside disciplinary programming. A HE sector view of

pedagogy based solely as a 'mode' of practice could limit provision for students because it seems to assume a disciplinary WBL context, disregarding the 'newer' variations of WBL and their contributions to innovative HE pedagogy.

WBL providers have the capacity to identify and support flexible alternatives to conventional HE pedagogy, and provide a more student-centred approach (Walsh, 2008). Researchers, educational developers and academics could use the WBL perspectives highlighted in this research to create more 'hybrid' pedagogy (Boud, Solomon and Symes, 2001) that could answer specific institutional drivers while providing sound educational provision. This view of hybridity could be considered with the conceptual framework of WBL pedagogic perspectives, where practitioners could deliberately develop practice using various elements from the range of WBL.

The findings in this paper are related to further research that evidence innovative HE practices using WBL principles. For example the use of personal and professional reflection and evaluation of the workplace promotes 'theoretical insight' that creates a 'framework' for experiential learning (Siebert and Walsh, 2012) that could be used more widely. Similarly, the use of assessment portfolios for workplace cases or projects provides clear examples of how to evaluate experiential evidence (Jones, 2013) and could provide a more flexible assessment tool for other programmes.

In the current climate of HE, enabling WBL pedagogy could facilitate flexibility for institutions that need to diversify the learning and teaching for full-time, part-time, and distance students as well as those who require work placements and internships. Continuing to resource staff familiar with WBL pedagogy to work in a pan-university capacity could benefit an institutional approach to innovation and provide a wider base of staff with useful alternatives for flexible mainstream provision. Within European policy, the call for more integrated curriculum and evidence-based practice has meant



that WBL is being once again examined for its “nature and form” (Devins, 2013, 8) as a way of “unlocking the potential of HEIs to make a greater contribution to a smarter, more inclusive Europe” (Devins, 2013, 29) through a common framework approach.

While much of the research in this paper has concentrated on WBL for students who were already in their professional roles in the workplace, flexibility initiatives from the Higher Education Academy provides guidance on how to embed WBL innovation into the more mainstream HE curriculum. In *Flexible Pedagogies: employer engagement and work-based learning* Kettle looks at WBL as a way to engage with the employability agenda (2013) addressing tailored WBL, collaborative approaches, and real-world reflective practice. Barnett notes that flexibility has two ‘clusters of meanings’ one which is learner flexibility “concerned with the immediate experience being extended to the student in his/her curricula and teaching” (Barnett, 2013, 61) and one in which the student is enabled to engage with the world; WBL pedagogy is flexible in both regards.

Picking up this theme, Costley indicates that flexibility can be offered by the range of WBL models that foster a wider interpretation: “Partnership programmes, individual programmes, programmes that build opportunities for individuals to accredit some or all of their experiential learning, programmes that include taught modules from in or outside the university are all part of a negotiated flexible structure” (2013, 404). This positioning for more flexibility within HE may require an advocacy role for future academic practitioners with WBL expertise. The research presented in this paper indicates that advocacy is crucial for academics to develop WBL pedagogy and curricula within institutional contexts.

From a European perspective, there is the need for more of an evidence base to understand this pedagogic range (Devins, 2013). Research into WBL within HE should

recognise the variations for provision and actively engage in academic debate within institutional settings and professional organisations. The research has been able to bring some of the 'newer' WBL pedagogies in context with more traditional practice-based WBL pedagogies that are also experiencing pedagogic changes. For example, within the learner-centred perspective, the recognition of transdisciplinarity from HE research councils has created a renewed interest in WBL research that "focuses on the multi-dimensional nature of knowledge needed for understanding differing contexts of work." (Gibbs and Costley, 2006). New publications, such as Gibbs (ed.) *Transdisciplinarity Professional Learning and Practice* (2015), continue to explore the underlying philosophies that could be used to theorise WBL and HE pedagogy.

## **Conclusion**

WBL provides a critical pedagogic direction for future development for experience-based learning within the university. The discipline-centred, learner-centred and employer-centred pedagogic perspectives present an examination of this range using the experiences and points of view of academic practitioners. As previously indicated, this paper argues that understanding the nuances of the perspectives and distinctions in the academic discourses across the range could enable academics to apply and embed various elements of existing WBL pedagogy into their practice. A greater understanding of WBL pedagogy could benefit the future development of more flexible approaches to curricula within the university setting, especially for non-traditional or mature students with part-time routes who might be based in the workplace for some or all of their studies.

While more traditional perspectives of WBL continue to inform practice, newer perspectives of WBL have created a more diversified and flexible range of professional

practice that could be utilised within university learning and teaching. These variations across the range of practice are important ones to consider when designing new curricula with work-based elements. While the use of WBL has now become more recognised within HE, the diversity and applicability of WBL pedagogy can sometimes be difficult to appreciate because of the complexity of the issues and contexts involved.

WBL practitioners who are being tasked to develop outward looking pedagogic strategies for universities are often at the forefront of assessing the needs of new types of adult learners and widening access routes for HE. Workplace learning strategies, embedded in work-based pedagogy, resonate with more mainstream flexible provision that aims to develop the learning professional. Resources to develop new hybrid strands of WBL pedagogy could benefit the support of students within HE who are within the workplace or experiencing the workplace for the first time. Understanding this range of practice with the discipline-centred, learner-centred and employer-centred perspectives will enable practitioners to orient and develop their pedagogy within individual programmes and allow WBL approaches to be used more effectively to inform the development of outward looking and responsive HE provision.

## References

- Abukari, A. 2014. Pedagogical Beliefs in Work-Based Learning: an Analysis and Implications of Teachers' Belief Orientations, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 19:4. 481-497. doi: 10.1080/13596748.2014.955644
- Barnett, R. 2000. Realizing the University in an Age of Supercomplexity, Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Barnett, R. 2014. Conditions of Flexibility Securing a More Responsive Higher Education System, York: The Higher Education Academy.
- Boud, D. and C. Costley. 2007. 'From Project Supervision to Advising: New Conceptions of the Practice', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. 44 (2): 119-130.

- Boud, D. and N. Solomon. 2001. 'Repositioning University and Work', in Boud, D. E. and N. E. Solomon. eds. 2001. *Work-Based Learning: A New Higher Education?*, Buckingham: Taylor & Francis Inc.: 18-33.
- Boud, D. and N. Solomon, and C. Symes. 2001. 'New Practices for New Times', in Boud, D. E. and Solomon, N. E. eds. 2001. *Work-Based Learning: A New Higher Education?*, Buckingham: Taylor & Francis Inc.: 3-17.
- Brennan, J. and B. Little. 1996. *A Review Of Work-Based Learning In Higher Education*, London: Quality Support Centre and Open University Press.
- Browne, J. 2010. *Securing A Sustainable Future For Higher Education Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance*, 12th October, 2010, Crown Copyright.  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf)
- Bryman, A. 2008. *Social Research Methods* (Third Edition), and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Connor, H. 2005. *Workforce Development and Higher Education*, London: The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE).
- Costley, C. 2013. pbk ed. 'Workplace Learning and Higher Education'. in M. Malloch, L. Cairns, K. Evans, and B. O'Connor, eds. *The Sage Handbook of Workplace Learning*, London: Sage, 395-406.
- Costley C. 2010. 'Introduction', in *Doing Work Based Research*, Costley, C., G. Elliott, and P. Gibbs 2010. London: Sage Publications, xiv – xix.
- Costley, Carol and P. Armsby. 2007. 'Work-Based Learning Assessed as a Field or a Mode of Study', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32 (1): 21-23.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). 2009. *Higher Ambitions the Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, Norwich: The Crown Copyright.  
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.bis.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/publications/Higher-Ambitions.pdf>
- Devins, D. 2013. *Overview Of Work Based Learning In Europe Deliverable 6: Work Based Learning as an Integrated Curriculum* (WBLIC). Leeds: Policy Research Institute at Leeds Metropolitan University.
- Dewey, J. 1910. *How We Think* (Originally) Boston: D.C Heath Publishers (republished) Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd. 2010.

- Eur-Lex. 2011. *Official Journal of the European Union, Council Resolution on a Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning Document 32011G1220(01)*, 2011/C 372/01. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_.2011.372.01.0001.01.ENG](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2011.372.01.0001.01.ENG)
- European Commission (EC). 2015. Europe 2020. [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm)
- Gibbons, M., C. Limoges, H. Nowotny, S. Schwartzman, P. Scott, M. Trow. 1994. *The New Production of Knowledge*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Gibbs, P. ed. 2015. *Transdisciplinary Professional Learning and Practice*, London: Springer.
- Gibbs, P. and C. Costley. 2006. Work-based learning; discipline, field or discursive space or what?', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. 11 (3): 341-350.
- Gray, D. 2001. 'Work-based Learning, Action Learning and the Virtual Paradigm', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 25 (3): 315-324.
- Helyer, R. 2015. 'Introduction', *The Work-based Learning Student Handbook*, London: Palgrave. 1-12.
- Hordern, J. 2013. 'Workforce Development, Higher Education and Productive Systems', *Journal of Education and Work*. 27 (4) 409-43. doi:10.1080/13639080.2012.758357
- Jones, E. 2013. 'Practice-Based Evidence of Evidence-Based Practice: Professional Practice Portfolios for the Assessment of Work-based Learning', *Quality in Higher Education*, 19 (1): 56-71. doi: 10.1080/13538322.2013.772467
- Kettle, J. 2013. *Flexible Pedagogies: Employer Engagement and Work-based learning*, York: The Higher Education Academy.
- Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience As The Source Of Learning And Development*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Leitch, S. 2006. *Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for All in the Global Economy - World Class Skills*, Final Report. Norwich: HMSO.
- Lester, S. and C. Costley. 2010. 'Work-Based Learning at Higher Education Level: Value, Practice And Critique', *Studies in Higher Education*, 35 (5): 561-575. doi:10.1080/03075070903216635
- Mason, J. 2002. *Qualitative Researching*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage Publications.
- Medhat, S. 2008. *The Path To Productivity The Progress of Work-Based Learning Strategies in Higher Education Engineering Programmes Final Report*, The New

- Engineering Foundation London in Partnership with The Higher Education Academy.
- Nixon, I., K. Smith, R. Stafford, S. Camm (KSA Partnership). 2006. *Work-based Learning: Illuminating the Higher Education Landscape Final Report*. London: The Higher Education Academy.
- Nottingham, P. 2012. 'An Exploration of How Differing Perspectives of Work Based Learning Within Higher Education Influence the Pedagogies Adopted.' Unpublished Thesis. London: Birkbeck University of London.
- Nowotny, H., P. Scott, and M. Gibbons 2001. *Re-Thinking Science Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Nussbaum, M. 1993. 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach' in Nussbaum, M. and A. Sen, *The Quality of Life*, eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 242-269.
- Phillips, N. and C. Hardy, 2002. *Discourse Analysis Investigating Processes of Social Construction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rounce, K. and B. Workman. eds. 2005. *Work-based Learning in Health Care: Applications and Innovations*, Chichester: Kingsham Press: 99-112.
- Schön, D.A. 1987. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Seagraves, L. M. Osbourne, P. Neal, R. Dockrell, C. Hartshorn and Boyd, A. 1996. *Learning in Smaller Companies (LISC)*, Final Report University of Stirling, Educational Policy and Development, Stirling: University of Stirling.
- Sen, A. 'Capability and Well-being' in Nussbaum, M. and A. Sen, *The Quality of Life*, eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 30-53.
- Siebert, S. and A. Walsh. 2013. Reflection in work-based learning: self-regulation or self-liberation?, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18 (2): 167-178.  
doi:10.1080/13562517.2012.696539
- South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC). 2010. *SEEC Credit Level Descriptors*. <http://www.seec.org.uk/seec-credit-level-descriptors-2010/>.
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). 2012. 'Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality', *Chapter B3 Learning and Teaching Guidelines*, Gloucester: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.  
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>

- Walker, M. 2006. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, Maidenhead: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Walsh, A. 2008. 'What is distinctive about work-based knowledge and learning?', *Work-based learning Workforce development: Connections, frameworks and processes knowledge and learning?* The Higher Education Academy, July 2008. 8-17.
- Walsh, A. 2014. 'Experiential Learning: A New Higher Education Requiring New Pedagogic Skills', *Promoting, Assessing, Recognizing and Certifying Lifelong Learning International Perspectives and Practices*, Springer. 109-130.
- Wedgwood, M. 2007. *Higher Education For The Workforce: Barriers And Facilitators To Employer Engagement*, DIUS Research Report 08 04, Department of Industry University Skills.
- Wilson, T. 2012. *A Review of Business-University Collaboration*, London: Crown Copyright. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-university-collaboration-the-wilson-review>